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ABSTRACT

Natural environments is a term used in the regulations for Part H of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It states that early intervention services must be provided in natural environments, including home and community settings in which children without disabilities participate. Questions addressed in this paper include: (1) What is a natural environment? (2) What is the interface between what is meant by natural environments and integration and inclusion? (3) Does "natural environments" mean "least restrictive environment"--the term used in Part B of IDEA-- for babies? (4) Who determines what a natural environment is and is it the same for every family and child? and (5) What happens during a transition from Part H to Part B, Section 619 of IDEA? The document also examines three key laws that have had a significant impact on the concept of natural environments in the past 20 years: (1) the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; (2) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (formerly called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) and referred to as P.L. 94-142); and (3) the Americans with Disabilities Act. (SG)

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COALITION QUARTERLY

EARLY CHILDHOOD BULLETIN

NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR INFANTS & TODDLERS: AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN & MEANING OF THE TERM

FALL/WINTER

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Coalition Quarterly

EARLY CHILDHOOD BULLETIN

News by and for Parent Members of State Interagency Coordinating Councils

Fall/Winter Prepared by Parent Component Staff of NEC*TAS • Janet R. Vohs, Editor 1993

Natural Environments for Infants and Toddlers

An inquiry into the origin and meaning of the term

Natural environments is a term used in the regulations for Part H of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The proposed language for the revised regulations states:

> (1) to the extent appropriate to the needs of the child, early intervention services must be provided in natural environments, including home and community settings in which children without disabilities participate.
>
> (2) as used in paragraph (b) (1) of this section natural environments means settings that are natural and normal for the child's age peers who have no disability. ***Federal Register***, May 1, 1992.

But what is a natural environment? What is the interface between what is meant by natural environments and integration and inclusion? Does "natural environments" mean "least restrictive environment"—the term used in Part B of IDEA—for babies? Who determines what a natural environment is? Is it the same for every family and child? How do we address the individual characteristics and circumstances of a child and family in the selection of a natural environment? What happens during a transition from Part H to Section 619 of Part B of IDEA? Does the concern for providing services in a natural environment become a concern for being educated in the least restrictive environment when the child moves from the early intervention program, governed by the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), to preschool programs, governed by the Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

When the regulations for Part H were being written, parents, professionals and advocates wanted to support the law's orientation toward family-centered and community-based services. The term "natural environments" was chosen as a way both to clarify the intent of the law and to extend even further the concepts of inclusion and participation in all aspects of community life that were gaining momentum nationally as reflected in major advances in legislation and service provision.

History

It was within the lifetime of most of today's parents that infants with disabilities were institutionalized as a matter of routine and that most babies who were born prematurely or who needed sophisticated medical technology simply died. It is also within that lifetime (albeit for some parents their very early life!) that children with disabilities were excluded, routinely and legally, from schools simply because they had a disability.

We have come a long way in the past twenty years. Since the early 1970s, human and civil rights activists have helped create and change laws that have had a tremendous impact on the way programs and services are designed and delivered. Together these laws and practices have begun to change societal norms and attitudes.

Laws Establishing Rights for People with Disabilities

Among the many laws that affect the lives of children with disabilities and their families, three have had a significant impact on the development of Part H and the concept of natural environments: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (formerly called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) and referred to as P.L. 94–142), and the

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Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 established civil rights for people with disabilities. It required access for people with disabilities to organizations and institutions receiving federal money. Public schools, hospitals, human service programs and many other places and programs had to make their services and programs available to people with disabilities. Through the years, this law has quietly stimulated changes in attitude and practice that support greater participation of people with disabilities in schools, jobs and communities. This concept of inclusion underpins the intent of Part H.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

In 1975, P.L. 94–142 was passed. Part B of this law entitled all eligible children with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and required that this education take place alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. States are required to demonstrate that procedures are in place to ensure that:

> ...to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions and other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily ... 20 U.S.C. 1412(5)

While this statement establishes a clear preference for integration, the regulations implementing this law tempered this preference by requiring a "continuum of placements" (Biklen, et al 1987). These regulations were based on the work of Reynolds (1962) who proposed a "continuum of educational placements for children with handicaps ranging from the least restrictive ... to the most restrictive," that is, from regular classrooms to special classes and special schools, to institutions. The regulations for P.L. 94-142 set as national policy the concept of the least restrictive environment or LRE.

When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now called IDEA) was amended by P.L. 99-457 in 1986, a new section called Part H was added which established early intervention services for children ages birth to three. Building on the intent of P.L. 94-142, Part H and its regulations (both in 1989 and the proposed regulations of 1992) supported the use of community settings but carefully avoided terms like "continuum" and "least restrictive environment" in reference to infants and toddlers. Caution about the use of these terms reflected a shift in thinking among service providers, parents and advocates about the concepts of integration and inclusion.

Although quite visionary in a time when children with disabilities were excluded from schools, now the concepts of LRE and continuum of placements are being challenged. Experts point out that many children and adults with disabilities get caught in the continuum; that is, they become locked into a separate placement, always "getting ready" for the next step but rarely taking that step. The continuum also implied that the need for more services or more intensive services necessarily meant the need for more restrictive environments (Taylor, 1988). Most children with disabilities who did gain access to regular classes received special services in areas apart from their classmates. We now know that supports and services can be provided in regular classrooms, and that the need for services does not dictate where those services can or should be provided.

When it was time to establish a preference for the "regular" environment in Part H, a new term "natural environment" was chosen and explanations were included in both the regulations and the notes accompanying them. In the effort to develop a seamless service system, states and jurisdictions are working for coordinated, smooth, and positive transitions from Part H services to Part B (Section 619) services. However there are still challenging obstacles for families and service providers, particularly in honoring philosophies and legal requirements around natural environments, least restrictive environments and inclusion.

Americans with Disabilities Act

And finally the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) supports the home and community orientation of Part H. Passed in 1990, the ADA is the most sweeping civil rights law for people with disabilities in the world. ADA extends Section 504 in three ways important to children. First, the ADA requires, with a few exceptions, that all public and private establishments, organizations, and programs be accessible, not just those receiving federal funds. Second, the ADA requires true access, not just

programmatic access. Third, the ADA prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and their families. The ADA opens the door to day care, preschools, and other children's community activities to children with disabilities. (For more information about the ADA, contact Robert Wardell, Parent Information Center, 151A Manchester St., Box 1422, Concord, NH 03302.)

What It Means

An expert team working with the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System (1988) suggested that natural environments for infants include "their home and increasingly ... some type of group setting" such as play groups and day care settings. They suggested that early intervention services (1) can be delivered in any of these natural environments and (2) should facilitate children and families to participate in these environments. The expert team also suggested that early intervention services should assist families in integrating their child into their family unit, into their family's cultural system and into their family's wider community. For families active in a religious organization, assistance might include helping the family and the organization make accommodations so that the child and family may participate as others do. For a family involved with motorcycles and the culture around motorcycles, help might mean figuring out with the family how to maintain and extend those connections to include their child. Families accustomed to frequent travel may need help to accommodate their child's needs as they travel. The meaning and importance of natural environments will continue to unfold as families and providers work together in their communities.

Biklen, D., Lehr, S., Searl, SJ and Taylor SJ. (1987) Purposeful *Integration ... Inherently Equal*. Boston: Federation for Children with Special Needs.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA), P.L. 101-476, 20 United States Code, Secs. 1400 – 1485.

Early Intervention Programs for Infants and Toddlers with Handicaps, *Federal Register* (May 1, 1992).

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System (1988). The Concept of LRE As It Applies to Infants and Toddlers. Chapel Hill: NEC*TAS.

Reynolds, M. (1962). A Framework for Considering Some Issues in Special Education. *Exceptional Children, 28*, 367-370.

Taylor, SJ. (1988) Caught in the Continuum: A Critical Analysis of the Principle of the Least Restrictive Environment. *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 13*(1), 41-53.

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Now, Let Us Hear from You...

The concept of natural environments has raised more questions than answers. It points to a direction, but leaves a lot of room for how the details will be defined. As answers—and more questions—emerge, it will be important for parents to hear about solutions that have worked or not worked in other areas of the country. How are states addressing this requirement in their own policies? How are programs addressing it in their services? How do families know about it, understand it and apply it? To begin to explore these questions, *Early Childhood Bulletin* is inviting readers to comment on or answer the following frequently asked questions:

- ***What are natural environments?***
- ***How do the concepts of integration, inclusion and natural environment relate to each other?***
- ***Does natural environment mean least restrictive environment for babies?***
- ***Who determines what the natural environments are for individual families?***
- ***Is the natural environment the same for every family and child?***
- ***What happens during a transition from services provided under Part H to services provided under Part B, Section 619, with respect to natural environment and least restrictive environment?***
- ***How are your ICC, your lead agency, and/or your family approaching these questions?***
- ***Are there other questions about natural environments that you are asking?***

Readers are invited to send their responses to the above questions, and pose new questions, to: Ruth-Ann Rasbold, NEC*TAS, Federation for Children with Special Needs, 95 Berkeley St., Suite 104, Boston, MA 02116. Responses received by April 1, 1993, will be reported in the summer issue of *Early Childhood Bulletin* of the *Coalition Quarterly*.

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Dear ICC Parents,

The NEC*TAS staff at the Federation for Children with Special Needs met many of you this summer at the annual Partnerships for Progress Conference. We are Evelyn Hausslein, Ruth-Ann Rasbold, Martha Ziegler and Janet Vohs. All of us are parents of children with special needs. One of the lessons we learn early in our careers as parents is the immense value of learning from and working with each other. We are eager to expand our ability to share and tap into our collective wisdom, insight, knowledge and information on early childhood issues and parent leadership initiatives and networks. Our work with NEC*TAS provides opportunities for us to learn from each other and to establish collaborative relationships with early childhood professionals.

NEC*TAS supports parent participation through four specific services available to ICC parents:

- ***Early Childhood Bulletin.*** This two-to-four page insert in the ***Coalition Quarterly*** is written specifically for, and often by, ICC parents. Its purpose is to provide a parent perspective on critical issues in early intervention. ***Coalition Quarterly*** is written for a wider audience of parent leaders working in Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) around the country.
- **Partnerships for Progress Conference.** All parents are welcome to attend this conference. NEC*TAS will pay for travel and accommodations plus a stipend for one ICC parent from each state. The dates for 1993 are August 1 – 3.
- **Teleconferences.** Two or three times a year ICC parents may participate in a national teleconference to discuss with other ICC parents a topic of interest. NEC*TAS sets up the call and individual parents ask their state ICC for financial support, usually about $25—$35 per call. The next call is scheduled for March 17. All ICC parents will receive information on how to register.
- **Individual Support and Consultation.** Evelyn and Ruth-Ann are available to you by phone or mail to discuss isssues related to the mission and operation of ICCs and to your own role on the ICC.

There are two important ways you can help represent parents in the technical assistance NEC*TAS provides:

(1) Serve as a Parent Consultant. You can share your expertise as a consultant to NEC*TAS in planning and presenting at conferences and in reviewing publications. NEC*TAS is eager to use knowledgeable parents in providing technical assitance. A parent consultant form will be sent to you upon request.

(2) Work with your PTI. The PTI in your state provides information and training to parents about issues in special education and health services. The PTIs are a valuable resource for information in all aspects of relevant laws and current practices. Many PTIs are just beginning to develop information specific to the interests of parents of young children served under Part H. We anticipate that additional federal support will be provided to help PTIs meet the training and information needs of these parents. We suggest you start working with these centers on issues particularly relevant in your state. We can provide information about the PTI in your state.

We want to be a resource to you in any way we can. You can reach us by calling (617) 482-2915. We look forward to hearing from you and learning from you as well.

Sincerely yours,
Evelyn Hausslein and *Ruth-Ann Rasbold*
NEC*TAS Staff at the Federation for Children with Special Needs

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